

## Eight-Week Shamatha Retreat, Fall 2013

### Week 6

#### Day 34, am. 7 October

This week we revisit Settling the Mind in its Natural State. It is also called 'Taking Appearances and Awareness as the Path'. Focusing on one image, one thought, one memory is enough. It is clearly stated in all the instructions that one is looking at the essential nature of what comes up. One can get caught up in the content of the appearance, but this is not the practice. It is not Vipassana. In Settling the Mind in its Natural State, one doesn't have any interest in the content or referent as such. It's more about looking through it. It's not analytical. It's simple. But it may be quite challenging. It is easy to become bored – if one is looking at the content. But the essential nature of the appearance is the interesting part. What is it about the phenomenon that makes it a mental event? See that it was not there prior to, and in dependence upon, conceptual designation and related events. What is it about the appearance that demarcates it? Where are the borders between 'it' and 'not it'. *"In the seen, let there be just the seen.....In the cognised, let there be just the cognised..."*

In the following meditation, we will linger on the first point of distinguishing between stillness and motion. After settling your body, speech and mind in their natural states, and calming the mind with Mindfulness of Breathing, let your awareness come to rest in stillness. Using introspection, recognise that when your awareness moves, it is because you are grasping. That is what sets it in motion. So when you observe this has happened, relax, release and return to the present moment. If dullness emerges, simply *refresh, restore and retain* your attention.

*Silent meditation ...*

**Stage 7: Fully Pacified Attention.** At this stage, one achieves the pacification of melancholy and lethargy (and all the other mental afflictions) and matures in the practice. It is achieved by the *power of enthusiasm* (the 4<sup>th</sup> of the 6 perfections). Enthusiasm is defined as taking delight in virtue (that is, in all the 6 perfections). One cannot get back to the cushion fast enough. The practice is going smoothly, but more subtlety is required.

The problem that persists at this stage is the subtle imbalances of attention that are swiftly rectified. There is parity between the level of excitement and laxity to which you are still prone. Tsongkhapa said that among all the imbalances that have to be surmounted, subtle laxity is the most difficult.

The attentional imbalance is subtle laxity, which means that the object appears vividly but the attention is slightly slack. Unless one knows what it is like to have periods free of subtle laxity where the attention is described as high definition, high resolution or really sharp (that is, because there is no competition), it is difficult to understand what it is like. One has almost slipped into the substrate consciousness. However, one will notice that the object may not be so clear in the next session as it was the previous session. The antidote to rectify subtle laxity is to use one's introspection like a scalpel, just tweaking or fine-tuning as required. Some people can linger here for weeks or months simply because the nature of the fine-tuning required is so subtle.

The type of mental engagement is interrupted (although not very much)

The quality of experience (for Settling the Mind in its Natural State) is familiarity. One is well accustomed to the practice and experiencing deep flow.

The metaphor (for Settling the Mind in its Natural State) is involuntary thoughts are like a river slowly moving through a valley.

#### Day 34, pm.

Given that it is Week 6, everyone has probably decided on the Shamatha method that suits them best and is now in a rhythm with their practice. With the meditation this afternoon, spend the first half achieving meditative equipoise as you normally do. Then spend the second half practising *tonglen*, but letting your attention roam to see who comes up.

*Silent meditation ...*

The next aphorism is referred to as post-meditative yoga: *"Whatever you encounter, immediately apply it to meditation."*

It helps to break down the distinction between your time on and off the cushion. It's easy to slip into thinking that you are only practising Dharma when you are meditating. But it's important to integrate it into everything you do, whether it is felicity or adversity.

The emphasis here is transforming all adversity from running out of toothpaste to becoming seriously ill, getting mugged, losing your job, etc. into the practice. Expect that problems will arise in your life. This is normal. It's

Samsara. Having high expectations creates an environment for a lot of suffering. But instead of becoming negative when things don't work out how you would like them to, think: "Isn't life wonderful" and abide in that joy. When solely focusing on the self, the lack of toothpaste can become a tsunami, as "What we attend to becomes our reality".

Recognise that others have the same challenges. Check whether you are treating others with an "I-it" or an "I-you" mentality – it's not about what you can do for me. Expand your view. Attend to others with compassion and your world gets larger. Imagine taking on others' suffering as well as your own. "May all beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering."

One can also experience genuine unhappiness even when all one's basic hedonic needs are met. There is no obvious catalyst, no obvious trigger from outside. Recognise that this unhappiness is coming from you. You can't blame someone or something else. Self-centeredness and self-grasping are toxic to the mind.

Some people think that having mental afflictions is normal, that it's human nature. The consequence of such thinking is, for example, anger management courses rather than courses with the aim of anger eradication, of workplaces where being foul-mouthed is considered the norm, where greed is seen as successful, where ethical behavior is what you can't get away with, and so on.

There are two principal domains of happiness:

- (i) Hedonic well-being. Tibetans see the following as mundane requirements for happiness: to be free of debt, to have adequate shelter, food, clothing, and medical care when it is needed. It's hard to flourish if you don't have these basic needs met.
- (ii) Eudemonic well-being. This is the happiness that comes from living an ethical life, where you do as little injury as possible to other sentient beings. Happiness is a clear conscience, that what you are bringing to the world is meaningful and good.  
If you achieve samadhi, Vipassana and bodhichitta, eudemonic happiness is taken to an even higher level.

All the practices are designed to help you overcome the desire to pursue only hedonic pleasures. That doesn't mean that one should neglect the mundane necessities of life, but rather to shift one's priority to the pursuit of eudemonic happiness. This means transforming all experiences into the path.

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In response to a question about why we should put all hope aside ....

When it comes to hedonic pleasures, hope is fairly straightforward. But when it comes to Dharma, it's a matter of definition. It never means to give up aspiration. But it does mean giving up hope that your practice will turn out this way or that way. This creates grasping, anxiety and uncertainty and it will obstruct your practice. Leave hope to the time between meditation sessions!

Aspiration in Dharma means:

- (i) to achieve enlightenment (the vertical dimension)
  - (ii) to cultivate "May I be of the greatest possible benefit to other sentient beings" (the horizontal dimension)
- Bodhichitta combines these two: "May I achieve awakening in order to be of greatest possible benefit to other sentient beings". But this doesn't entail hope; it entails aspiration.

If you have confidence in the practice, you don't need to hope for anything. What you are doing can't fail. You can't control it and progress might be slow, but you are moving in the right direction. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche said "Eventually by the power of bodhichitta, we will be free even from the hope of accomplishing bodhichitta and the fear of not doing so'.

So when adversity strikes, there are two approaches:

- (i) the first elementary approach is psychological. We can say: "Hey it happens. It's no big deal. Make the best of it." Shantideva said: "If there is something you can do about it, why be unhappy? Just fix it. On the other hand, if there is nothing you can do about it, why be unhappy? How is that helping? Accept it". There is a lot of unnecessary suffering that we can release/avoid.
- (ii) Bringing in whatever insight you have about bodhichitta. If it is true that nothing exists prior to your conceptual designation, then you as the observer-participant creating your own world, your own karma, can choose whether to see it as adversity, or felicity, for you if you designate it as such. If you have some understanding of the emptiness of all phenomena that are rising up to meet you, you can change your view. This is much more than psychology. You do need some understanding of Dharma to be able to do this. How you designate is not determined by karma. You are not pre-programmed. It's your choice.

## Day 35, am. 8 October

We return to Settling the Mind in its Natural State. It's useful to put this into context. Why are we so vulnerable to suffering? The reason is that we closely hold on to, and identify with, our body and our mind.

In this practice, we are deliberately withdrawing our attention, even from the experience of our own body, to just the mind. We are disengaging from the body by not identifying with it. But with respect to the mind, we are closely identifying with it. For example, if anger arises, my identity is so bound up with 'me' in that particular mental event that I think it is 'my anger', not just 'anger arising in the mind'.

These practices are trying to defuse this identification with 'me'. So we are rolling back from the 'I, me, mine' and we are now trying to extricate, by attending to the mind rather than being totally cognitively fused with it. We are rolling it back from conceptual mentation to non-conceptual mentation (from reifying this from that), from afflictive mentation (that is, I'm here, you're there and we are completely separate) to the substrate consciousness and to the substrate (the launching pad for every rebirth we've ever had – a pool of potentiality).

So, in the session to follow, focus on the space of the mind, which is a sign, something we are looking at. Be selective and be single-pointed with your attention. The space of the mind is still – it's sheer vacuity. Then something happens, probably some rumination, image or memory comes up, and when this happens, see where there is motion. Exercise discernment to distinguish stillness from motion. And release any grasping. We are trying to get out of old ruts and into new patterns via meditation.

*Silent meditation ...*

**Stage 8: Single-pointed Attention.** One achieves this stage when one can sustain samadhi for a long time without excitation or laxity. Meditating for 3 to 4 hours is not difficult. It is achieved by the *power of enthusiasm*. The problem that persists is that initially it still takes effort to ward off subtle excitation and laxity, but once into the flow, it's smooth and virtually effortless. So one is watching attentively for any subtle excitation or laxity. The attentional imbalances are none, they have gone dormant, but there are latent impulses for subtle excitation and laxity. The type of engagement is uninterrupted. The quality of experience (for Settling the Mind in its Natural State) is stillness. It's single-pointed. The metaphor (for Settling the Mind in its Natural State) is the normally discursive mind is calm like an ocean unmoved by waves. So on the surface it is very still, but below there is still some movement (like currents deep in the ocean).

## Day 35, pm.

The meditation session this afternoon will comprise two complementary halves. In the first half, cultivate ultimate bodhichitta (emptiness) as best you can, practising Shamatha without a Sign and engaging in the oscillation process of probing right into the lived experience of being the observer, followed by resting in/releasing back into awareness. In the second half, cultivate relative bodhichitta by practising *tonglen*, either focusing on a particular individual or letting your awareness roam and see who comes knocking at your door.

*Silent meditation ...*

Reviewing the aphorism "*Whatever you encounter, immediately apply it to meditation*" ... it relates to the cultivation of ultimate and relative bodhichitta – the two fundamental antidotes to self-grasping and self-centeredness respectively.

Which do you value more – hedonic well-being or eudemonic well-being? If your priority is hedonic well-being, it will be difficult to practice *Lojong* because when things go wrong hedonically, you just want them to stop, you will not be habituated to exercising transformation.

Bringing awareness in upon the observer, some of the appearances seem to point to you. Is that you? Did you get a snapshot of your core? It's an appearance, but not an appearance of 'an inherently existent, real you'. You will find that it is empty. This practice can give you some insight into the autonomous agent, a prerequisite to achieving Vipassana and ultimately rigpa.

## 4. A Synthesis of Practice for One Life

We now move on to the next point in the Seven-Point Mind Training and the next aphorism "*To synthesise the essence of this practical guidance, apply yourself to the five powers*".

The five powers are:

- (i) the power of resolution – to resolve never to be separated from the two bodhichittas – ultimate and relative bodhichitta.
- (ii) The power of familiarisation – never to be distracted from the training. Be careful choosing the people with whom you associate because you might become like them.
- (iii) The power of positive seeds – constant devotion to your spiritual practice.
- (iv) The power of revulsion – revulsion towards self-centeredness and self-grasping. When you sense it coming up, having zero tolerance of it, and recognise that it is toxic.
- (v) The power of prayer – pray never to be separated from the two bodhichittas, never to be separated from your spiritual mentors, and never to be separated from the Dharma.  
Who are you praying to? To the Buddha, the mahasiddhas, the yidams. They are not ‘out there’. One is tapping directly into rigpa. One’s coarse mind is communicating directly with one’s very subtle mind.

There are many accounts of highly realised yogis having direct visions as a result of deep prayer and meditation. Prayer is like an aspiration. e.g. “May I never be separated from the two bodhichittas...” A prayer like this said regularly could become the link to a precious human rebirth in the next lifetime. Before you get to the point on the path that is irreversible, practise with the power of prayer. Not even a Buddha can cleanse someone else’s karma. When things happen to you, whether positive or negative, generally speaking it is the result of the maturation of your karma. You can pray for a blessing. There are many holy places around the world to which people make pilgrimages to receive blessings.

“Be careful what you pray for because you might get it”. If you wish to be healthy, rather than totally focusing on its hedonic aspect, it’s better to think that your good health is a means to your doing more for others. So engage in pure aspiration or pure prayer that transcends hedonic well-being. When adversity arises, view it as an aid to your spiritual development and transform it into the path.

The more you immerse yourself in the Dharma, the more the whole of reality rises as a blessing. The universe is user-friendly to those who dedicate their lives to the Dharma. It’s not just about karma. The more deeply rooted the prayer is in ultimate and relative bodhichitta, the more the universe rises up to meet you.

### **Day 36, am. 9 October**

We continue with Settling the Mind in its Natural State. The focus in the following meditation is simply to observe the ‘objective’ appearances that arise in the space of the mind. Some people do not have the ability to visualise well, and it is not just limited to sight. We mentally perceive sounds, smells, tastes and textures and then fit them into our conceptual framework based upon memory. So, in the session, focus on these mental events and on your rumination. It’s easy to get snagged by these particularly for us living in the modern western world. We are so wired and our prana systems are so dysfunctional. Everything is bound up in grasping. When this happens, relax, release. You will be able to know stillness versus movement if you maintain a deep sense of relaxation at your core.

Those who have the gift of faith, it can be very helpful to visualise your guru/deity above the crown of your head, and with supplication say “May I flourish in this practice”. Then imagine the guru/deity dissolving into light and that light descending down to your heart. Imagine the non-duality of you and your guru during the session. Your guru is free of grasping and has achieved rigpa. This approach will turbo-charge your practice. It’s the power of your own mind, the depth of your own mind that you are tapping into.

Relax in every way, then centre yourself in stillness, then let your awareness illuminate the space of your mind and observe the movement when appearances arise. You are there with a passive, alert, discerning mind but the key to this practice is relaxation.

*Silent meditation ...*

Stage 9: Attentional balance. This stage is achieved when you experience flawless samadhi that is long, sustained and effortless. In doing so, you accomplish the perfection of relaxation. This is attained by the power of familiarisation. Although you started to get into flow at Stage 4, at Stage 9, it’s ultra flow.

The problems that persist are none.

The attentional imbalances have gone dormant. But the causes of excitation and laxity are still there as the mental afflictions are latent. So they could occur in the future. Remember that Shamatha is reversible. Between sessions, you are still operating out of your coarse mind.

The type of engagement is effortless.

The quality of experience is perfection (that is, relative to what you have experienced before, but not when compared to the perfection experienced further along the path to liberation)

The metaphor is the discursive mind is still like Mount Meru, the king of mountains.

### Day 36, pm.

This afternoon, we will return to the essentials of the meditative practice for the Seven-Point Mind Training, that is, return to ultimate and relative bodhichitta.

With ultimate bodhichitta, in the meditation do the best you can either with Awareness of Awareness, Settling the Mind in its Natural State by observing the space of the mind. You can reflect on how the teachings relate to your experience and you can apply them to your meditation. It's a matter of familiarisation. Having heard the teachings and thought about them, and you are not confused about the practice, simply know that you are doing your best, and get satisfaction from this. That's how you reach Shamatha.

So divide the time between ultimate bodhichitta and relative bodhichitta/ *tonglen*. Keep your awareness free and open, but if someone in particular – living or dead - comes up, invite them in.

*Silent meditation ...*

To continue with the fourth of the five powers, the power of prayer...

“Spiritual practice’ doesn’t have to involve spirits, gods, angels, etc. It can be a lot more practical than that. It can simply be oriented to the cultivation of genuine happiness.

But we have the issue of ‘spirit’. There are three kinds:

- (i) The spirits that some people claim to be able to see (on the horizontal dimension). Do they exist?
- (ii) The ‘holy spirit’ descending from the Divine, which is important in theistic traditions (the vertical dimension). There is a similarity with blessings from the buddhas, bodhisattvas. Are we receiving anything back? Do they do anything that helps or harms? Buddhists say yes. When you offer prayers, does anything happen to those whom you pray for? Is there causal efficacy?
- (iii) The human spirit or ‘geist’ with which mind, volition, consciousness are bound up. Is it more than the brain? The majority of scientists say no. Is there anything more than physics, chemistry and biology? If not, prove it! Not everyone wants to believe we are like robots.

Alan’s view is that we’ve been living in ideological Dark Ages for the last 150 years, since ‘*The Origin of the Species*’ was published and Darwinism was turned into a religion - referred to as the Church Scientific or scientific materialism. This distortion of science became fundamentalist. Not all scientists subscribe to this belief, but the majority does. However, some scientists do believe in non-physical aspects of the universe. For example, in 1914 a study was undertaken which found that 40% of scientists said they believed in a god who responds to prayer. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the same question was asked and the proportion remained unchanged.

Is the physical universe closed? Can there be any non-physical causes in the universe? The majority of the scientific community says no. If something exists, it is declared physical. But the discoveries in quantum physics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century contradict this theory. There are non-physical influences on the universe.

For example, what about the effect of placebos in health care? They are based on faith in the effect of the medication and faith is very definitely non-physical. Discrete and appropriate physiological processes are triggered simply because one believes. There is empirical evidence to support this. This is a mystery, but many scientists have stopped asking the question as to why.

An additional example is that information has causal efficacy in our world, but information is non-physical. Information has causal efficacy when interpreted by a mind. Yet scientists say you should not believe anything without sufficient evidence and use this as a criticism of religion. They say that they only follow the evidence while religious people do the opposite. However, many of the most eminent scientists in history have believed things when there was minimal evidence and it was later proved that their belief was justified.

The point here is that Buddhism is either intelligently credible or it’s not. It’s important that we understand why we have ended up where we have. Alan’s view is that scientific materialism has severely limited the imagination of science and thereby set unnecessary limits on what topics can be investigated scientifically. Unfortunately the scientific materialist paradigm dominates politics, the media and education. This has seriously reduced our human potential.

## Day 37, am. 10 October

In this morning's meditation session, we will again practise Settling the Mind in its Natural State. While still observing the objective appearances that arise in the space of the mind, this time we will pay particular attention to the subjective impulses, intentions, desires, emotions (wholesome, neutral and afflictive) that also arise. Subjective impulses often catch you before you are aware of them. In other words, you become aware retrospectively, even if it is only a ¼ second later. Be aware of them without identifying with them. Analyse what is the impact of emotions on your mind?

We will be integrating back into our social lives in two and a half weeks. We will experience lots of mental afflictions, including subjective impulses. If we are not ready to catch these as they arise, they can become enacted in negative physical behavior that not only causes us, but others also, to suffer – both of which result in negative karma. The purpose of this retreat is to bring mindfulness into our worlds – to become aware of our mental afflictions before they come out of our mouth or translate into negative physical behavior – to catch the spark before it turns into a flame.

It is important to apply discerning intelligence constantly, to use introspection, to check one's subjective impulses and recognise what is wholesome and what is not. Simply become aware of unwholesome impulses and then let them dissolve into the space of the mind. Accept that mental afflictions happen to all of us, so deal with them intelligently by applying the appropriate antidotes. By doing so, we can save ourselves and others much grief.

On another issue, it is normal to have 'good days' and 'bad days' (days with distraction, rumination, boredom, dullness, etc). It is very important that you do not focus on what happens to you, but rather, how you respond to it. Remind yourself of the two pages of signs of progress in Alan's book '*Stilling the Mind*'. What may appear as negative are in fact signs of progress. This is the path of self-knowledge; it's not about hedonic happiness. So, see them but don't identify with them. Transmute these into the path. The good days will happen by themselves in their own time. If you find you are experiencing dullness or distractions, you may like to shift to practising *tonglen* with an open heart towards all those people who are experiencing dullness and excitement in their meditation. Blend the practices of Seven-Point Mind Training and Shamatha to manage obstacles in your meditation.

In the meditation session to follow, regardless of which practice you are doing, be kind to yourself. Keep in mind that your purpose is to cultivate genuine happiness both on and off the cushion.

*Silent meditation ...*

### Beyond Stage 9: The achievement of Shamatha.

The first indicator is a sense of heaviness or numbness on the top of one's head. This signals freedom of mental dysfunction. One attains mental pliancy expressed as mental suppleness, malleability, smoothness. This triggers the vital energies that lead to physical pliancy which is felt as a total rush, like the dam has burst. One's prana is free-flowing and one becomes free of physical dysfunction. It fills one's entire body, as if one's body were filled with dynamic energy.

This triggers a huge sense of bliss that saturates one's whole body.

This triggers mental bliss – one's mind is blissed out. When this happens, one is totally overwhelmed. This rapturous pleasure subsides and gradually tapers off in a matter of hours.

One then sustains one's attention on the meditative object and Shamatha is achieved.

Then releasing the attention, one rests in the substrate. Inverting one's awareness in on itself, one experiences self-illuminating mindfulness. One's body and mind are ready to do whatever one wishes.

## Day 37, pm.

*Silent meditation ...*

Returning to yesterday's comment that scientists say you should not believe anything without sufficient evidence... This belief itself is based on insufficient evidence. Darwin thought he had the answer in evolution through natural selection. He summarised that natural selection allows a sentient being to get the attributes that are required in order to survive and procreate as a species in a changing environment. So, for example, cheetahs are able to run a bit faster than their prey but not a lot faster than their prey. Evolution is parsimonious. Yet, human beings are known to have immeasurably more intelligence than other species, in orders of magnitude far beyond that of animals. Is this about natural selection? Similarly, our desire for transcendence is way beyond something necessary biologically. Most of the great scientists including Darwin have not followed the maxim of only believing something when there is sufficient evidence, because that is how working hypotheses are formed and investigated. Scientists often pursue ideas over a prolonged period of time because they believe that these ideas might be true.

In 2013, the scientific community equates the mind with the brain. If things are equivalent, you would expect to see common characteristics. However with the mind and the brain, there aren't any. Furthermore, you can't see them simultaneously. As one eminent scientist stated: "I can't imagine that the mind could interact with the brain unless it were physical". But if it were physical, you could see the phenomenon and its function at the same time. This is true of all nature. Look at the brain and you can see neurons functioning. But you can't see mental events when you look at the brain. Scientists – except for neuro-physicists - can't imagine it, therefore think that it is not true. Neuroscientists are not required to take a single course in quantum mechanics. So what is taught does not take any of these discoveries into account.

Another scientist, a Nobel laureate, said: "Mental disorders, like depression and schizophrenia, are of a biological nature". They are the result of brain chemistry and genetics! The consequence of such a statement is that one cannot be responsible for one's condition. But where do we stop? Is it all simply biological in nature? Are we not responsible for anything? Morally responsible for anything? There is insufficient evidence for this view.

Might there not be influences outside the brain that contribute?

Maybe the brain simply acts as an enabler?

Maybe the brain transmits activity from another domain?

There is insufficient evidence to support these. Maybe there are non-physical influences on the brain! However, scientists will not contemplate such a notion – "What we can't measure in the lab does not exist". This is religious fundamentalism. And it is very poor science.

The problem with this is that continuing to promote such a view hurts people. It says their illness is just a matter of brain chemistry or genetics and they cannot be responsible for their condition, and thereby their behavior. This notion suggests that 'it's not their fault because they are helpless'. This view is tragic for the domain of mental health science. And it all stems from not being able to imagine that anything could be non-physical.

John Haldane in his book "Possible Worlds" stated: 'I have no doubt that the future will be vastly more surprising than what I can imagine. I expect it is not only that it is queerer than we suppose, but stranger than we can suppose.'

Alan's view is that the only way to break the stranglehold of this scientific materialistic view is for people of Alan's generation to die off one by one. As Max Plank said: "Science progresses funeral by funeral". They have too much invested in terms of power, prestige and money, yet their view is all based on blind faith. A presumption is made of the unity of metaphysical beliefs and science. You can't have one without the other. Such a view is saturating modern cognitive-science. Alan's hope is that the next generation will bring in a new open-mindedness and a fresh approach. The real question is "What does and does not constitute evidence?"

The significance of this outline is to emphasise that what we are doing in this eight-week retreat is either seriously important or we are wasting our time!

### **Day 38, am. 11 October**

This week, while practising Settling the Mind in its Natural State, we have been covering a different aspect each day to ensure that we are doing it in its entirety. This morning we will concentrate on the on-going flow of mindfulness or cognisance, of vacuity and absence of thoughts, without spacing out. This is practising Shamatha with a Sign because you are attending to the space of the mind as the vector of your attention. It is important to take notice of the intervals between thoughts. Be especially attentive when you don't see any thoughts or 'targets'.

*Silent meditation ...*

What happens after you achieve Shamatha?

There is a lot of misinformation about this. Why? Because on the one hand, often those who study it (the academics) don't practise it and on the other hand, many teachers who have popularised Shamatha have had very little training and done very little study of the basic texts. But the material is there in all the Buddhist traditions, if one takes the time to look.

What is it like to rest in Shamatha, on the threshold to the first dhyana?

- One abides in meditative absorption
- The coarse and subtle mind calms
- The five senses totally shut down (like in dreamless sleep)
- The five obscurations become suppressed
- The counterpart sign arises
- The ordinary mind (psyche) disappears and compulsive thinking subsides

- One slips into the substrate and all appearances vanish as grasping diminishes
- The substrate is free of elaboration, the one taste and ethically neutral
- Sheer awareness, luminosity and vividness appear
- One senses the mind as being indivisible from space
- One experiences such mental and physical bliss that one does not want to arise from meditation, and feels one could remain there for months or years
- One achieves some insight into Vipassana as a vehicle to get onto the path
- After achieving the first dhyana, one can remain single-pointedly focused on the mind, which is signless, devoid of ideation and calm for at least 24 hours. One has moved from the Desire Realm to the Form Realm.

The achievement of Shamatha is emphasised as the basis for proceeding along all contemplative paths.

### Day 38, pm

The antidote to a false facsimile of compassion is empathetic joy.

Alan referred to the young Pakistani girl, Malala Yousafzai, who continues advocating very publicly the importance of education for girls despite death threats and being shot. Alan highlighted her as an example of someone out there in the world trying with pure motivation to do good for others.

The meditation to follow is a variation of *tonglen* where you are receiving blessing from the enlightened ones and sending out loving kindness to yourself and others. This meditation is secular in nature.

*Guided meditation ...*

Alan revisited two statements he made the day before, because he wanted to make sure they were not seen as being contradictory.

- (i) Since around the time of Darwin, about 150 years ago, the growth in human knowledge is greater than we have learnt in all the preceding centuries. So we should celebrate science!
- (ii) We've been living in the metaphysical Dark Ages for the last 150 years. There has been no comparable growth in the physical, objective, quantifiable sciences. This stems from ignorance and is the metaphysical burden of scientific materialism.

When one considers this enormous growth in knowledge, yet in the same time period, the massive damage to the natural environment, the extermination of so many species, man's inhumanity to man, to name three, it's brilliant but also tragic. How is this possible? The reason is that there has been great asymmetry in the pursuit of knowledge (heavy on external knowledge but light on internal knowledge).

William James stated that faith and preference don't have a role in truth in terms of the realm of actualisation. However they do have a role in the realm of possibility. A placebo is a good example. Such truths cannot become true until our faith makes them so.

So, is it possible to achieve Shamatha? If you say no, then you won't. If you say yes, then you might very well get there. If you have a vision, it's in the realm of possibility, but it could manifest in the realm of actualisation. If you don't have a vision, you are stuck. When you hold a vision in your heart, and believe it, visions can become real.

The way to get out of the Dark Ages of the last 150 years is to follow William James' recommendation. He advocated empirical research (empiricism as opposed to dogmatism), which means to view 'conclusions' as hypotheses open to change without bias, to be open to all evidence not just the evidence that supports your case, to question the underlying assumptions, and report findings honestly. This is the basis upon which science was launched.

What is the role of the mind in human existence? This question remains unanswered. The dominant paradigm is that the mind is the brain! The study of the mind is currently like physics before Galileo. How does one study the mind? We need to rely on introspective observations first and foremost. That means observe the phenomenon of that which you are trying to understand. Introspection, based on subjective experience, is the only way. With this as the foundation, one could then study behaviour and things such as correlates with the brain. Some say that introspection is too difficult, because we are so often deceived by appearances. BUT all our experiences, including scientific observations are fallible and difficult, so there is nothing special about introspection. One starts with an observation. Then one investigates whether others have replicated that observation to determine where there is consensus. One continues to probe and make modifications as new insights emerge until one arrives at a 'conclusion'. This is empirical.

What happens to the mind when you devote yourself to religious practice? What is the subjective experience? Empiricism has been dissociated from religion ever since the time of Thomas Sprat. Many believe that first person research is impossible. "It is only through measurement and experimentation (empiricism) that we can have a wider vision".

How can science get back on track?

- (i) Through a reformation, like the protestant reformation, which frees science from the ideological tyranny of scientific materialism.
- (ii) Through a first true revolution in the mind sciences – by fundamentally questioning its deepest assumptions.
- (iii) Through a renaissance of contemplative inquiry (drawing on one's own inner wisdom) in all the great religions in the world, which would provide the foundation for a science of religions.

### **Day 39, am. 12 October**

This morning, we continue unpacking Settling the Mind in its Natural State. We will concentrate on the utter simplicity of the practice of settling in stillness first. It is so easy and it requires no preparation. Simply rest in stillness and know it. Then let the light of your awareness illuminate the space of the mind and be cognisant of that space. As you are ascertaining the sheer vacuity, also notice the objective appearances and subjective impulses in the space-like awareness.

In anticipation of coming out of retreat in a couple of weeks, many of the people you come into contact with will not be so homogenous. You will need to be able to maintain that stillness when facing the display of a wide variety of behaviours, whether the behaviour is directed towards you or to others. Of course, it is all happening in the space of your mind. So be totally present, and avoid fusing with those impulses.

So in the meditation session to follow, observe both the stillness and the movement of thoughts, emotions, images, etc. simultaneously and do your best to sustain the flow of single-pointed awareness.

#### *Silent meditation ...*

The purpose of achieving Shamatha is not simply to have a wonderful experience at the time it is attained. As a result of the coarse and subtle pranas now flowing smoothly, a huge shift takes place in one's body and mind that carries over into the rest of one's activities:

- When one rises from meditative equipoise, one has a sense of physical pliancy, a lightness, suppleness and buoyancy
- Unprecedented absence of dysfunction
- There is an on-going sense of well-being
- One can rest in Shamatha/space-like awareness whenever one wishes
- Afflictive thoughts are of short duration
- The five obscurations hardly arise
- The allure of hedonic pleasures subsides, as the bliss and luminosity of Shamatha are more appealing
- One's attentional clarity is high resolution/high definition – reality is a trip!
- The stillness one experiences makes one feel as if one's sleep is fused with samadhi
- One's attention is highly focused in all activities
- One is fully in control of one's mind – one can use one's mind as one wishes
- One is virtually free of sadness
- One experiences an inclination to practise virtue
- One is ready for further contemplative training

When doing this practice, it is very common for stuff to come up as you are dredging the psyche. At times, it can be overwhelming. To deal with this:

- (i) rest in stillness, be present with it, and eventually it will dissolve. If this is too difficult,
- (ii) shift to practising *tonglen*, where you can cultivate loving kindness for yourself and for others who suffer in the same way. This is making use of 'skillful means' to help you get through difficult periods.
- (iii) You can take an interest in it. How is it present? How did it come up? Where does it come from? Why? Etc. and it will eventually dissolve.

Integrating the Seven-Point Mind Training with your Shamatha practice equips you to deal with all situations. If Garchen Rinpoche can transmute all experiences into the path during his 22 years in a concentration camp, you can too.

## Day 39, pm.

This afternoon, we will leave the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and return to the Dharma as it has been taught over the last 1500 years. We will do a meditation practice based on the power of prayer. It's *tonglen* with a sweet twist. When you reflect on the suffering and the causes of suffering in the world, and take it upon yourself, it's heavy but it can really deepen your practice. This afternoon, instead of taking on the suffering, we are going to take on the blessings of the enlightened ones where they dissolve into our heart and then send compassion out to others. It's a powerful practice and it can be quite transformative. Some recommend that before going into the sequence of Shamatha, Vipassana, and the dhyanas to enlightenment, consecrate your body, speech and mind with the Stage of Generation in the form of Avalokiteshvara.

Refer to the commentary by Gatrul Rinpoche of the practice in the book "A Spacious Path to Freedom by Karma Chakmé".

In the meditation to follow, with your eyes closed:

Take refuge in bodhichitta

Settle your body, speech and mind in their natural states

Bring whatever insight you have to the emptiness of all phenomena and release any conceptualisation of anything

Rest in the substrate, or the facsimile of the substrate

With the power of imagination, dissolve everything into emptiness.

Melt your coarse mind into your substrate consciousness, which in turn melts into rigpa, which is inherently luminous and rest in the dharmadatu.

Moved by bodhichitta, break the dharmadatu, and out of the emptiness imagine your emergence as the seed syllable 'Hrih'.

Dissolve your ordinary being right down to the ultimate ground of your being and from that emptiness, arise as Avalokiteshvara. You arise fresh primordially pure as a pure vision

When you receive the blessing from Avalokiteshvara, you know it. The mantra and the sadhana have been blessed by Avalokiteshvara. The more faith, compassion and purity of mind you bring to the meditation, the more blessings you will receive.

*Meditation with Alan reciting the sadhana ...*

The root of the Dharma is compassion. For all practices, may they be rooted in compassion, embodied by Avalokiteshvara.

The next aphorism "*Do not rely on the individual, rely on the Dharma*" is as relevant today as it was centuries ago. 'The individual' referred to here is your teacher, guru, spiritual mentor, the person you receive teachings from. Out of the individual and the Dharma, your primary reliance should be on the Dharma. The teachers' role is to convey the Dharma. You can receive a blessing from the teacher but you can also simply view the teacher as a spiritual mentor.

The teacher is like the doctor (the Buddha is the physician), the Dharma is the medicine, (this is the most important ingredient) and your fellow sangha, the nurse (who will take care of you along the way).

A blessing is not data transfer. There is something that is given that nurtures, nourishes, empowers the practice.

In the modern western world, the individual/the person seems to take precedence over the message he/she may convey. We project and pile loads of importance on this.

We are not just going to a teacher for information and self-improvement. As soon as a thought comes into your mind: "I'd like to follow the path", and you know it means for future lifetimes as well, this is where it starts. This is called renunciation. You know you need a spiritual guide who can show you the way as you know you cannot do it on your own. Beyond that you want to achieve liberation for the sake of other sentient beings. When that arises, you are not just looking for information. Ideally you will find a guide who is connected to a lineage, who is an authentic transmitter of the teachings. You then have strong benevolent motivation. You see your teacher as an emissary of Shakyamuni. This is as close as you get to a Buddha. When you appreciate this, then you receive a blessing. It has nothing to do with idolatry. It's a bit impersonal, but it's not cold.

In the Mahayana context, the dharmadatu is everywhere present. There is nowhere that is not saturated with Buddha-mind. Look for a teacher who is giving authentic teachings. Look right through them to the dharmakaya, then you may receive a blessing. If you are receiving teachings which originally came from Padmasambhava, then

see your teacher as Padmasambhava. This is Mahayana. If the behavior of the teacher is incongruous with the teachings, move on. If he /she is not a suitable vessel for the teachings, move on. In response to the question: "Is it necessary to have a spiritual teacher? The Dalai Lama said "No. But it can save you a lot of time if you do".

Realise that there is no self. There is no one there to be found. You are empty of inherent existence. Then direct your attention to your guru/teacher, who appears to be there from his/her own side. But in fact, he/she is also empty of inherent nature. In that emptiness, there is a pervasion of dharmakaya. Then out of pristine awareness, look on your teacher as a Buddha. You are then attending to Tara, Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Samantabhadra, etc. It is then that you receive the blessing. When you go deeper, you eventually find that the two are indivisible.

But more importantly, rely on the Dharma. Focus on the meaning; don't get caught up in the words. Go for the definitive meaning. Don't rely on your ordinary mind. The conditioned mind has limits. Use the dualistic mind as long as it is useful. But use primordial consciousness as your refuge.

**Day 40, am. 13 October**

No teachings.